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LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHER

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: TUNISIA CONTINUES TO EXPAND INTERNET CENSORSHIP

REF: TUNIS 130

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) While publicly promoting the internet as an economic tool, the Government of Tunisia is privately blocking an increasing portion of the web. Officially, only sites that promote violence or pornography are blocked in Tunisia, but in practice, sites with content critical of the GOT, such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, have long been blocked. More recently, sites like YouTube have become inaccessible in-country because of government filters. These controls are in contrast to recent indications of increased openness in some print media. Even so, the internet (especially social networking sites such as Facebook) is growing in popularity, and many Tunisians are knowledgeable about ways to bypass government filters. End Summary.

Brave New World

¶2. (C) Several recent incidents illustrate how the GOT is increasing internet censorship. Nearly each week brings a discovery of a new website that is now blocked in Tunisia. On May 12, the Embassy learned that Islam online (a Qatari-based Yousef Qaradawi sponsored website) is now blocked in-country. The websites of foreign newspapers are also sometimes inaccessible, which generally coincides with periods when they carry articles critical of the government or President Ben Ali or interviews with opposition and human rights activists. Human rights sites critical of GOT policy, such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch, have long been blocked in Tunisia, but recently the list of blocked sites expanded to include video-sharing sites such as YouTube and Dailymotion.

¶3. (C) Embassy contacts frequently complain about internet censorship, noting that their organizations' websites are frequently inaccessible and that e-mails they send vanish en route, or if they are they contain only unintelligible symbols. French PolOff shared a recent case that took place shortly after French President Sarkozy's visit to Tunisia. A French reporter for Le Monde interviewed Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH) President Mokhtar Trifi for an article. A draft was e-mailed to Trifi prior to publication for his comments. When the reporter opened Trifi's response, she found it laced with obscenities, some pertaining directly to the writer. Le Monde checked back with Trifi through the French Embassy and found that his original e-mail had been substantially (and presumably deliberately) modified.

14. (C) The Embassy's consular section has experienced a similar problem with e-mail. Recipients of the bi-monthly consular newsletter reported that the messages were cut off after the first sentence, or replaced by strange messages in English such as "See you on Sunday!" or "Would you mind lending me some cash?" Consular wardens were unable to forward the altered messages because the e-mails vanished from their inbox. (Note: The Embassy will be raising this issue with the GOT.) RWB described a similar problem being experienced by Tunisian NGOs as "badly concealed filtering."

15. (C) The GOT has devised both direct and indirect means of censoring the internet, though few of these policies are a matter of law. Regulations rarely refer to the internet directly, and those that do date back to the late 1990s. Most of these laws concern internet cafes (aka publinets); the specifications are mainly technical, dictating the minimum numbers of computers required, the way they must be arranged, etc., though one clause does specify that internet cafes must post a sign informing clients that they are not allowed to access forbidden sites. What constitutes a forbidden site, however, is not defined in the legislation. Representatives of the inter-ministerial Committee for Internet Services are responsible for monitoring internet cafes and enforcing regulations. As there is no written documentation detailing what constitutes a "forbidden" site, these ministry officials serve as arbiters of what is acceptable. The uncertainty surrounding what is permissible also encourages proprietors of internet cafes to err on the side of caution, even when ministry officials are not present, for fear of repercussions. In practice, unacceptable themes encompass everything from human rights and religion to politics and pornography. According to press reports, new internet-specific laws are in the works, but no details as to their content are available.

16. (C) All of Tunisia's internet service providers (ISPs) lease their bandwidth from the governmental Tunisian Internet Agency (TIA). The Tunisia Country Report published by the OpenNet Initiative, a partnership of academic institutions created to analyze internet filtering, states that, "Tunisia achieves its filtering through the use of a commercial software program, SmartFilter...Because all fixed-line internet traffic passes through facilities controlled by ATI, the government is able to load the software onto its servers and filter content." Tunisia's censorship efforts focus on blocking entire web-based applications such as YouTube, but it also attempts to hide that censorship is taking place. Though SmartFilter is designed to display a "Forbidden" error message when a user attempts to access a blocked site, in Tunisia this message has been replaced by a "File Not Found" error message, mimicking a genuine error message users sometimes receive. Despite the facade, most Tunisians are aware that these sites are unavailable because they are blocked. As SmartFilter cannot be used to block or alter e-mails, the GOT probably employs additional blocking software.

17. (C) In addition to censoring the internet, the GOT also ensures that physical use of the internet is tightly controlled. Before accessing a computer, internet cafe users must show their national ID card to the cafe manager, who often makes a copy of the card. By law, computers must be arranged so that internet cafe administrators can easily view monitors at all times. Patrons of internet cafes report that internet users must request permission to print, and printouts are reviewed by internet cafe personnel before being given to the user. Proprietors are held responsible for the content viewed by their users. As there are no clear guidelines as to what constitutes appropriate use, internet cafe administrators tend to err on the side of (excessive) caution. Restrictive rules and regulations governing use of the internet are not limited to public venues. One university student said that when using the internet to conduct research, she was required to submit a list of all the sites she would be visiting in advance for approval, making spontaneous web-surfing impossible.

Where There's A Will...

¶18. (C) According to the OpenNet Initiative 2007 report on Tunisia, roughly one million people in Tunisia have access to the internet (out of a total population of 10.2 million), a respectable figure for a developing nation. When compared to mobile phone use (7.8 million Tunisians in 2007), however, it is clear that use of the internet lags behind that of other media. Still, an ever growing number of Tunisians are embracing the internet, and finding ways around government filters. Facebook is popular among young Tunisians, as are instant messaging programs. To find their way around filters, Tunisians try multiple domain names (e.g., while YouTube.com may be blocked, YouTube.fr may not be). Blocked sites can also be accessed through proxy servers, or by typing the URL directly. Reporters Without Borders (RWB) offers a "Handbook for Bloggers and Cyber Dissidents" available in French and English on its website (though the RWB website is blocked in Tunisia). Though the Embassy frequently raises internet censorship with the government, government officials consistently respond that censorship is limited to sites that promote violence or pornography. When the Ambassador told the Minister of Foreign Affairs that blocked sites also included human rights websites (such as Amnesty International) and YouTube, the Minister denied that he had ever heard of YouTube, and then claimed that he didn't even know how to turn on his computer.

¶19. (C) Willingness to circumvent government filters seems to be generational. Younger users seem to see filters as a challenge, while older internet users are more cautious. One contact told EconOff that he had heard rumors of security forces questioning people who had attempted to access blocked sites, thus he preferred not to try himself. On the other had, a group of young Tunisians talked openly about how they bypassed filters to view YouTube footage of protests in the Tunisian town of Redeyef (<http://youtube.com/watch?v=RiDHAYzqaLg>). Cell phone text messaging represents another means of bypassing government filters. As web-based forms of communication are subject to disruption, human rights activists and opposition party members often send out text messages to keep each other informed.

Comment

¶10. (C) Even as the print media has shown some signs of increased openness, internet censorship continues apace, reflecting the paranoia that still restricts freedom of expression in Tunisia. For this to change, the GOT would have to accept that open and free debate is good for the country and the government. The baby steps on print media signify an important step in the right direction, but limits on internet access make clear the GOT still has a long way to go on freedom of expression. End Comment.
GODEC